

## Training in psychopathology in Europe: are we doing well? A survey among early career psychiatrists

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### Summary

#### Objectives

a) to describe the current status of training on psychopathology; b) to identify the unmet needs of European residents in psychiatry; c) to suggest future perspectives of training in psychopathology.

#### Methods

In the period July-December 2013, the early career psychiatrists' representatives of national associations recruited from the early career psychiatrists' council of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) were invited to participate to an online survey. Each respondent was asked to provide the collective feedback of his/her association rather than that of any individual officer or member of their association.

#### Results

Thirty-two associations returned the questionnaire out of the 41 contacted, for a response rate of 78%. According to respondents, psychopathology should aim to assess psychiatric symptoms, to understand patients' abnormal experiences and to make nosographical<sup>1</sup> diagnoses. Karl Jaspers, Emil Kraepelin and Kurt Schneider are the most cited psychopathologists.

### Introduction

Psychiatry is a medical discipline with traditional strong links to the humanities, such as philosophy, psychology and social sciences<sup>1</sup>. The context within which psychiatry is practiced is changing rapidly from social, cultural and scientific standpoints<sup>2,3</sup>. The growing social problems, the occurrence of natural disasters<sup>4</sup>, the on-going economic crisis<sup>5</sup>, globalisation<sup>6</sup> and changes in family organisation and structure<sup>7,8</sup> are only some changes that have taken place in society during the last 20 years, which have had an impact on psychiatric practice. Other major changes are due to the development of new technologies, with a profound change in communication between people with the development

A formal training course in psychopathology is available in 29 countries. The main teaching modalities include theoretical lessons, while workshops and role play are needed. The vast majority of residents do not receive training in psychopathological rating scales, although they tend to use them in clinical practice. Half of the sample is not satisfied with received training in psychopathology. As main problems, lack of tutor and practical training were identified. All respondents agreed that psychopathology is the core part of psychiatric curricula and that strategies should be identified to make training in psychopathology more adherent with their needs.

#### Conclusions

Psychopathology has been recognised as a core component of training curricula for psychiatrists, confirming the recent need to re-discovery psychopathology, according to the agenda proposed by international associations of young psychiatrists. Initiatives to improve training and practice of psychopathology should be addressed by national and international psychiatric organisations.

#### Key words

Psychopathology • Quality of training • Unmet needs • Early career psychiatrists

of web-based social interactions, such as blogs, tweets, and social networks<sup>9-11</sup>.

As society changes, psychiatry needs to adjust its target accordingly, since mental health problems are the result of different biological, social and psychological factors<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the target of psychiatrists has also changed, from the treatment of mental disorders to the management of mental health problems<sup>12</sup>.

Another aspect that has had an impact on psychiatric practice is the widespread use of manuals and assessment instruments to make reliable diagnoses of mental disorders<sup>2,13</sup>. In fact, modern early career psychiatrists tend to base their clinical practice on rating scales rather than on in-depth psychopathological analyses of the patient<sup>14,15</sup>.

Until 20 years ago, no doctor would have started a career

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in psychiatry without studying the bases of philosophy and psychopathology. This is very rare today, with early career psychiatrists mostly focusing on reliable diagnostic criteria and assessment instruments<sup>16-17</sup>. This is probably why there has been recently a call to “rediscover psychopathology” and to go “back to fundamentals” by eminent scientists and mentors<sup>18-20</sup>. Moreover, the attention of psychiatrists in general is more on a clinical level and on the pharmacological treatment of mental disorders, rather than on the exploration of the phenomenological background of psychopathology<sup>21</sup>.

More recently, the importance for psychiatrists to have strong psychopathological bases has been repeatedly affirmed<sup>22</sup>. In fact, psychopathology represents the common language for psychiatrists worldwide, it makes a unique contribution to understanding patients’ personal experiences, it gives a holistic view to the patient and allows to validly apply operational criteria to support psychiatric diagnoses<sup>23-24</sup>.

In this paper, we will describe the current status on training and practice of psychopathology in Europe, report the unmet needs of training and suggest future perspectives for training in psychopathology.

## Methods

An ad-hoc questionnaire was developed using the same methodology adopted for other surveys recently carried out by the early career psychiatrists networks of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) and the European Psychiatric Association (EPA)<sup>25-27</sup>. The questionnaire consisted of 29 items, subdivided into 3 sections: a) knowledge of psychopathology; b) training in psychopathology; c) unmet needs and future perspectives for training in psychopathology.

In the period July-December 2013, 41 early career psychiatrists, representatives of the early career psychiatrists of their national associations and recruited from the early career psychiatrists’ council of the EPA, were invited to participate in an online survey through email invitation. Each respondent was asked to provide the collective feedback of his/her association rather than that of any individual officer or member. Thirty-two associations returned the questionnaire (response rate 78%). The list of participating countries is reported in Table I.

## Results

### Knowledge in psychopathology

Before starting the psychiatric residency course, almost all trainees have at least some basic knowledge in psychopathology, i.e. they know what psychopathology is and what is about. In fact, the primary aims of psychopathology are: 1) to assess psychiatric symptoms, 2) to

**TABLE I.**  
Participating countries.

Azerbaijan	Lithuania
Albania	Macedonia
Austria	Malta
Belarus	Montenegro
Belgium	Poland
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Portugal
Bulgaria	Romania
Croatia	Russia
Cyprus	Serbia
Czech Republic	Slovenia
Denmark	Spain
Estonia	Sweden
France	Switzerland
Germany	Turkey
Italy	Ukraine
Latvia	United Kingdom

understand abnormal experiences, and 3) to make nosographic diagnoses.

The most well-known psychopathologists are Karl Jaspers, Emil Kraepelin and Kurt Schneider, followed by Eugen Bleuler and Sigmund Freud (Table II).

### Training in psychopathology

A formal training course in psychopathology is available in 29 countries (90%). Considering the characteristics of training, in half of the countries the number of hours dedicated to psychopathology is not defined. Teaching modalities include theoretical lessons, role plays, workshops and discussions of clinical records, although theoretical lectures are the most widespread. Although the vast majority of residents use psychopathological rating scales in clinical practice, training in their use is very rarely offered. At the end of residency, the majority of early career psychiatrists are not satisfied with the training they received in psychopathology.

### Unmet needs of training in psychopathology

The three most important unmet needs for residents in psychiatry are: 1) lack of supervision from expert psychiatrists (which is available in only a few countries); 2) number of hours dedicated to psychopathology (which is far from being satisfactory in most countries); 3) time spent with patients. Moreover, most trainees believe that training in psychopathological rating scales should become a compulsory part of residency courses.

**TABLE II.**  
Most influential psychopathologists.

Most influential psychopathologists	Frequency, N
Karl Jaspers	19
Emil Kraepelin	13
Kurt Schneider	10
Eugene Bleuer	9
Sigmund Freud	9
Philippe Pinel	2
Nancy Andreasen	1
Silvano Arieti	1
Arnaldo Ballerini	1
Simon Baron-Cohen	1
Bruno Callieri	1
Lorenzo Calvi	1
Ernst Kreschmer	1
Victor Kandisky	1
Melanie Klein	1
Jacques Lacan	1
Michael Rutter	1

Although European early career psychiatrists think that psychiatry is based, and will continue to be, on psychopathology, the following misconceptions were identified: “psychopathology is not useful in clinical practice”; “psychopathology is old-fashioned”; “psychopathology is not interesting for psychiatric practice”; “we have no time to dedicate to the study of psychopathology”.

## Discussion

This is the first survey specifically developed to explore the characteristics of training in psychopathology and the unmet needs in psychopathological training of early career psychiatrists from several European countries.

The main findings of the survey were: 1) the level of satisfaction with training received is not very high; 2) psychopathological rating scales are used without appropriate training; 3) psychopathology represents the core part of psychiatric curricula.

Residents in psychiatry are not globally satisfied with their training in psychopathology. Comparing these results with those from other surveys regarding the status of training in other areas, such as psychotherapy<sup>27</sup> and early intervention<sup>26</sup>, the level of satisfaction with training in psychopathology is much lower, indicating that some actions should be taken. This dissatisfaction is probably due to the lack of a structured training course in psychopa-

thology, which is – in turn – a consequence of the current approach to psychiatric practice. Nowadays, psychiatric practice is more based on the management of symptoms without really considering the complexity of patients psychopathology<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, the number of hours dedicated to training in psychopathology is very far from being considered adequate by trainees. Recently, early career psychiatrists launched the need to “rediscover psychopathology”<sup>2</sup>, considering that the use of operational criteria of the international diagnostic manuals are not fully satisfying for formulating psychiatric diagnoses<sup>13</sup>. The results of this survey highlight the importance of improving psychopathological skills for young psychiatrists and to regain an holistic view of psychiatric patients, considering the complex interplay of biological, psychological and social factors of psychiatric symptoms<sup>28</sup>.

The fact that psychopathology has been recognised as the core component of training curricula confirms the need to “re-discovery psychopathology”, in line with the agenda of international associations of young psychiatrists, such as the WPA Council of Early Career Psychiatrists and the EPA Early Career Psychiatrists Committee<sup>2, 29</sup>. On these grounds, since 2013 the EPA section on philosophy and psychiatry runs a highly successful annual educational course on psychopathology that brings together many early career psychiatrists from Europe. Further educational activities include the organisation of scientific events and the production of books and educational modules for young psychiatrists<sup>30</sup>. Other initiatives to improve training and practice of psychopathology would be highly welcome.

## Conclusions

Although psychopathology still represents the core part of psychiatric curricula, there are no clear indications regarding training in psychopathology across Europe. This can be one of the reasons for the low level of satisfaction reported by residents in psychiatry. International associations, funding bodies, institutional agencies and other stakeholders involved in the mental health enterprise should work together to improve knowledge of psychopathology for the future generations of psychiatrists.

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### Conflict of interest

None.

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